

Day Eighteen - Queenstown to Milford Sound - 437 Km

The rain beat a frantic tattoo on the roof of the car, dancing in the weak beam of the headlamps on the road ahead. Such was the ferocity of the downpour; the note of the engine was almost drowned out in the din and somewhere out in the dark and mist ahead of us lay the route that we were all trying to follow. To the left the hard cliffs rushed by, reaching up into the sky and disappearing in the gloom, to the right was the sheer drop down to Lake Wakatipu, visible as a faint slither of water, a ghostly apparition of what had appeared to us all the day before as an ultramarine oasis, bathed as it was in bright sunshine. That was yesterday though, today we only had the dark dawn and the rainstorm for company as the New Zealand Classic made its way out of Queenstown.

As the miles were eaten up, out ahead there appeared the faint silhouette of a Bentley, barely visible in the grey, but clearly with its roof up. The imposing shapes of the cliffs and mountains were visible now, and the Bentley looked miniscule amongst them, forging on ahead against the seemingly insurmountable landscape and weather. The night began to recede and the morning appeared amongst the fog, in fact it was almost impossible to identify where the mist ended and the low hanging cloud began, but the road continued on regardless.

The countryside was broken occasionally by clusters of small dwellings, one horse towns that it seemed may not have even been there at all, were it not for the passing tourist busses and rental vehicles stopping for refreshments. Athol, population 87, horses 1. Garston, population 100, horses 1. Dipton, population 150, horses 0; in Dipton, even the Horse had bolted.

But hope springs eternal and eventually the morning brightened, leaving dramatic views out across the hills and mountains of the Southland. The low clouds crashed into the peaks, splitting and separating as they did into vivid formations and occasionally light from the sun broke through the malaise. That was mostly how it went on, particularly as the rally approached its lunchtime terminus at Te Anau. Travelling down the beginning of State Highway 94 all were treated to incredible views, their reverence such that they really deserved to be set to their own equally dramatic soundtrack.

Drama had already befallen a number of competitors, long before the approach to Te Anau, and despite the actual fog lifting, the view of the resplendent mountains may well have been obscured by the red mist emanating within the cars. You see, whilst there was only one regularity today, it was a long one and probably the most difficult of the event so far from a navigational point of view. There were a few victims, throughout the field, but none more high profile than car 33, who had been running a close second in the overall standings. They are now over a minute down, and this morning's competition may prove pivotal in the results of the entire event, but there is always time for a sting in the tail and success can breed complacency after all.

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